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SUBJECT: SUNNI ENDOWMENT LEADER REVEALS IIP ELECTION STRATEGY

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CLASSIFIED BY: John Naland, Leader, PRT Basra, Dept of State.

REASON: 1.4 (b), (d)

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Summary

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¶1. (C) In a August 12 meeting, Dr. Abd al-Kareem al-Khzraji, head of the Sunni Endowment for southern Iraq, provided his views on local and national issues. He gave positive marks to the current Basra Provincial Council and Sunni effectiveness within it, but criticized reconstruction efforts as not being sufficiently focused on improving essential services.

Al-Khzraji related news on the efforts of the head of the Sunni Endowment in Baghdad to create a new party, and the efforts of the Prime Minister and Vice President to build coalitions for the national elections. He blamed Al-Qaeda, JAM, and Iran for the recent increase in violence. Al-Khzraji noted progress on the return of displaced persons and national reconciliation.

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Local Issues: Pluses and Minuses
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¶2. (C) Al-Khzraji spoke positively of the new Provincial Council (PC), which he judged much better than the previous one. He said that the two Sunni members (IIP) had good relations with other PC members, including the PC chair. As an example, he cited the recent decision of the PC to allocate some 60 million dinar (\$52,000) for the restoration of two mosques damaged during sectarian violence. There was another damaged mosque that he hoped the USG might be able to help restore.

¶3. (C) Al-Khzraji commented on reconstruction efforts in the Basra region. He noted that improved security opened the way for renewed focus not only on reconstruction, but on important economic and social issues such as unemployment, displaced persons, and detainees. He said that the most pressing need was for essential services, but the general feeling among Iraqis was that there had been no progress on improving delivery of electricity, water, and sewage. He said that the USG was supporting many projects that had nothing to do with improving these services.

¶4. (C) Team Leader Naland replied that a substantial number of legacy projects were being completed to improve essential services, but that the USG focus was moving away from bricks-and-mortar projects to building capacity within the local and national government and civil society. He noted that the GOI had extensive oil resources it could develop to fund infrastructure development for essential services.

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Coalition Building in Baghdad
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¶ 15. (C) Al-Khzraji was aware of efforts at coalition building in Baghdad. He said that the IIP had devised a secret strategy to keep Sunnis voting as a bloc. A main component of it would be to appeal to as many voters as possible by fielding popular Sunni politicians under several parties, not just the Sunni Iraqi Islamic Party (IIP). Once the elections were over, these parties would join together in a larger coalition headed by the IIP. Ahmed Abd al-Ghafur, head of the Sunni Endowment in Baghdad, was forming a party called al-Mithaq al-Watini al-Iraqi (Iraqi National Charter) that would leverage his popularity among both Sunni and Shia Iraqis to win votes for the party. The party's platform would appeal universally: guaranteeing the delivery of essential services by fielding politicians and hiring government workers who were professional, efficient, and put their constituents' interests above their own. This would be highlighted in the party's slogan "The best people to benefit the people." Al-Khzraji said that Vice President Tariq al-Hashimi was responsible for forming another IIP shadow party to be known as al-Akd al-Watani (National Contract).

¶ 16. (C) Another component of the strategy, said al-Khzraji, was to attract Shia voters. Senior IIP officials were already approaching individual Shia figures (sheikhs, directors generals, popular community leaders) to gauge their interest in allying with the IIP. As for IIP's possible alliances, al-Khzraji also said that the IIP had not decided whether to join Maliki's coalition. He understood that PM Maliki was in discussions with Allawi to have Iraqi National Accord join his coalition. He had also heard that Maliki had decided against having the Saddarists in the coalition because their terms for joining included the release of all their detainees.

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Who's Behind the Recent Increase in Violence?
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¶ 17. (C) On the recent increase in violence, al-Khzraji fingered a number of possible culprits, including Al-Qaeda, Jaysh

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al-Mahdi sleeper cells, and Iran. He believed Iran would "never stop meddling in Iraqi affairs," and was now trying to create a bit of instability in Iraq to draw world attention away from its domestic political situation. He also blamed Iran for the increasing salinity of the Shat al-Arab waterway, citing Iran's diversions of water from rivers that feed the waterway.

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Displaced Sunnis and Reconciliation
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¶ 18. (C) The Team Leader asked about the status of displaced Sunnis in Basra province. Al-Khzraji estimated that about 50% of the people who had fled between 2005 and 2007 had returned to Basra. He believed there were a several reasons to explain why the rest had not returned. Perhaps they had found better lives outside of Basra or were reluctant to return because squatters were occupying their homes. He said he knew of some who feared being arrested based on false accusations made against them by people seeking retribution or revenge. Noting his role in intervening with the Iraqi Army and the Iraqi Police, Al-Khzraji said that these days the security forces were more savvy in handling accusations and intelligence tip-offs from Basrawis.

¶ 19. (C) On the broader topic of reconciliation, al-Khzraji said that lower-level Baathists were reintegrating into the political system. He cited First Deputy Governor Nazar Rabir and former PC member Hamed Aboud al-Thalmi (Iraqi National Accord) as examples. As for the Baathist leaders in exile, he said a number of them still hoped to reenter Iraq's political system as Baathists, believing Iraqis might eventually accept their argument and firm belief that it was Saddam, not the party, who bore full responsibility for past atrocities.

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Comment

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¶10. (C) Though the Sunni Endowment is a government-backed religious and social-services institution, its leadership is known to be closely aligned with the IIP. While the interests of the Sunnis remain foremost on the minds of leaders of both the Sunni Endowment and the IIP, there appears to be recognition that their interests can best be served by finding Shia political allies and attracting Shia voters. If the IIP and its shadow parties successfully implement this strategy, it will send a positive signal that political power can be gained by broadening a party's appeal rather than playing to narrow sectarian differences.

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